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Abstract of the paper of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research

New environmental governance on line thanks to new information and communication technology

I. Rationale

1. Many national, regional and international environmental programmes have produced an important amount of data and information. This treasure trove of information is difficult of access for reasons of a technical (incompatibility of format, distance), administrative (barriers between ministries, departments, universities, non-governmental organizations, etc.) and cultural (one believes that information is power) nature. New information and communication technologies now allow for new governance on line. The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), with its main partner, the Sahel and Sahara Observatory, have conducted promising projects in Africa.

2. The Institute's Environmental Information and Monitoring Systems on the Internet (EIMSI), set up in response to chapter 40, "Information for decision-making", of Agenda 21 and in particular to the obligations set by international legal instruments on the environment (e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Wildfowl Habitat and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) as regards the collection, exchange and distribution of environmental data and information, are virtual clearing-house mechanisms for environmental action programmes at the national and regional levels.

II. The audience

3. EIMSI and the Desertification Information Systems (DIS) enable all concerned parties (public services, civil society and partners in cooperation) at the national, subregional and regional levels to have access to a wide range of environmental information and data. They thus enhance the value and utilization of existing information resources and their use in decision-making processes. They facilitate synergy of effort between the different partners.

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III. The concept

4. EIMSI and DIS consist of series of items accessible in dedicated "kiosks" through the use of Internet services:

(a) Institutional kiosks, listing stakeholders involved in environmental programmes and describing their activities;

(b) Thematic kiosks, exploring by topic (biodiversity, climate change, desertification, forests and coastal areas) the know-how and skills that ensure synergy between national, subregional and regional coordination efforts, as requested by the international legal instruments on the environment;

(c) Kiosks on products in the form of:

(i) A virtual library, grouping together existing bibliographic references on a given topic and providing access to documents;

(ii) A virtual map library, making available maps and images in a standard format;

(iii) Country-at-a-glance files, describing, through a geographic information system on line (GISWEB) and in a synthetic manner, the state of the environment.

IV. The methodology

5. Successful implementation of EIMSI required two important phases:

(a) An institutional phase, guided by a participatory approach of all those involved in order to achieve an institutional profile of the environment and to issue an information charter describing:

(i) The functionality and results expected from the virtual clearing-house mechanism;

(ii) Administrative rules and regulations for the circulation of and access to environmental information;

(iii) Ethics and principles guaranteeing the right of access to environmental information;

(b) A capacity-building phase in support of implementation at the local level, through provision of training and equipment to persons and institutions in charge of the creation and updating of EIMSI.

V. Achievements

6. At the national level, in the context of implementation of their individual national action plan and under the auspices of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory, Mali, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia have already created a first version of their EIMSI. In order to set up its environmental action programme, Benin is also developing an EIMSI, while Burkina Faso, Guinea and Uganda are preparing their action programmes.

7. At the subregional level, the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel and the Economic Community of West African States are planning the development of a regional EIMSI to assist in the implementation of their subregional action plan. East Africa has expressed similar interest.

8. At the regional level, the United Nations Environment Programme Global Resource Information Database Geneva, the Institut français de recherche scientifique pour le

développement et la coopération and the Consultancy Services for Earth Observation have contributed to the preparation of a first version of an EIMSI for Africa.

VI. Partners

9. For the time being, the EIMSI programme being implemented by UNITAR in the framework of a tripartite arrangement with the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, and the Sahel and Sahara Obervatory is being supported by France, Germany, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, the Agence de la Francophonie and the Club du Sahel.

VII. Conclusions

10. UNITAR and the Sahel and Sahara Observatory are ready to give assistance to countries that are interested in setting up similar projects.

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